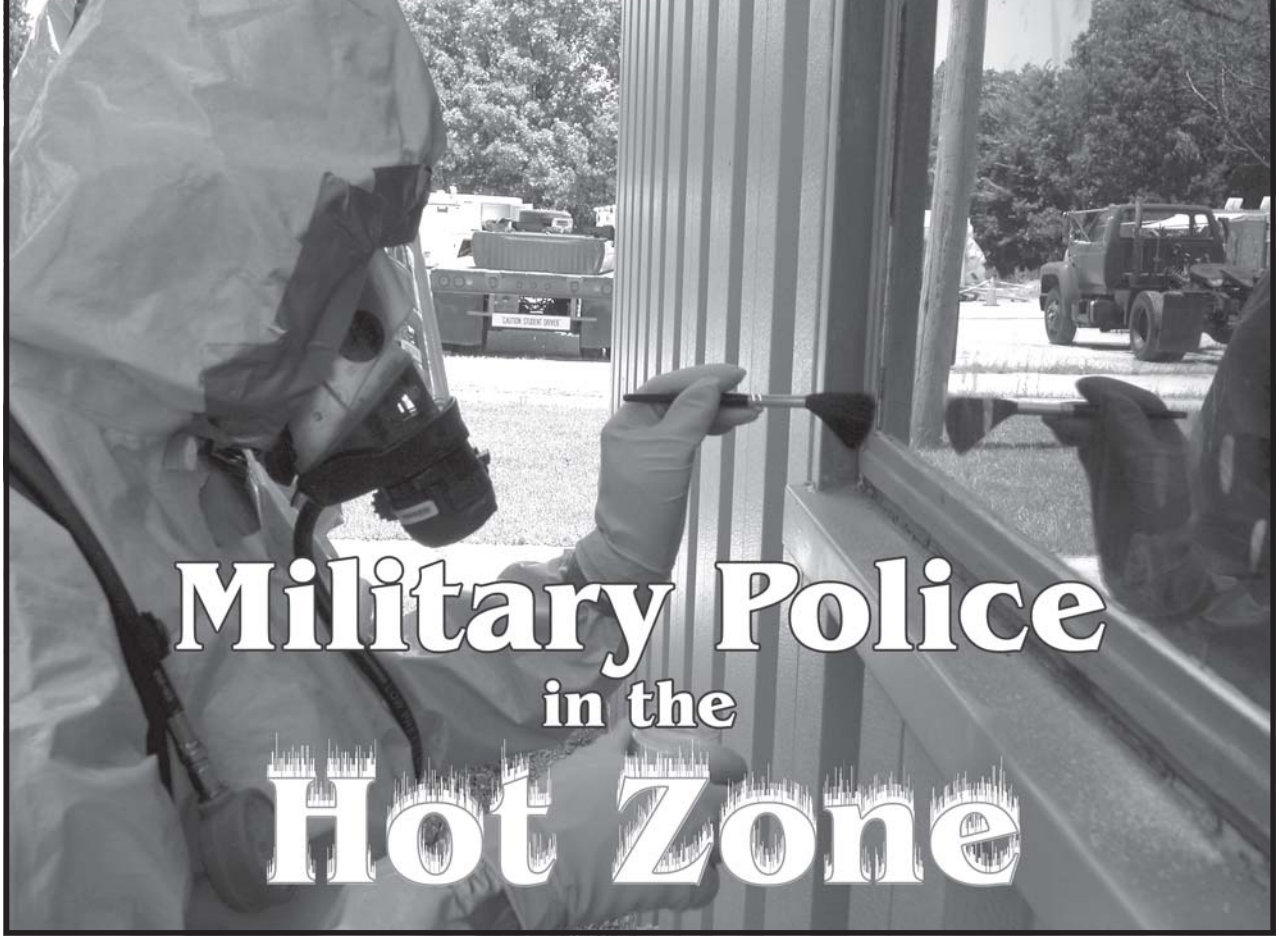

Military Police in the Hot Zone

A student searches for latent fingerprints at a mock crime scene.

By Chief Warrant Officer 3 Dale Antry

For years, military investigators have conducted crime scene investigations in areas contaminated by chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) devices. However, until now there has not been formal training for military investigators on how to protect themselves in these situations. After the events of 11 September 2001 and with today's increased threat from CBRNE weapons, the US Army Military Police School decided to develop training to prepare military investigators to enter a crime scene where there is a CBRNE danger, otherwise known as a "hot zone." Criminal Investigation Division (CID) agents and civilian employees who have both extensive training and personal experience in responding to hazardous material scenes teach the new Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)/CBRNE Crime Scene Processing Course.

The course stresses the technical, tactical, and leadership competencies related to processing crime or accident scenes in environments contaminated with CBRNE hazards. The two-week course also emphasizes the Incident Command System, which is the organizational management system mandated by the federal government. The course provides hands-on instruction in the four levels of personal protective equipment (PPE). Training includes working in all levels of PPE: Level A (the highest level of protection), with a fully encapsulated chemical protective suit and a positive-pressure, self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA); Level B, with a splash-protective outer garment and SCBA; Level C, with a splash-protective outer garment and air-purifying respirator; and Level D, which is normal duty clothes. Students learn the "dirty-clean" method of evidence collection—a two-person technique that ensures that no cross-contamination of evidence occurs.

However, the most significant concept emphasized throughout the course is that no person operates alone. Every action at the crime scene is performed by no less than a team of two persons. Also, unlike any conventional crime scene, a hot zone cannot be entered and exited easily. Anything that leaves a hot zone must be decontaminated, so crime scene investigators must operate in teams for evidence reconnaissance and collection. First, reconnaissance teams enter the scene to locate and document evidence. After leaving the hot zone, they report back to the collection team and provide a detailed briefing. This enables the evidence collection team to prepare all the equipment necessary for evidence collection, eliminating the need to make multiple entries and exits.

Wearing Level A personal protective equipment, students practice the dirty-clean method of evidence collection.

The course challenges students academically and physically. They get instruction on a host of different topics, to include hazardous materials, improvised explosive devices, laws and regulations pertaining to WMD and terrorism, biological and chemical hazards, and the Incident Command System. To pass the course, students must score at least 70 percent on a 150-question test. The course ends in an evaluated practical exercise in which students apply all that they learned throughout the course. During the exercise, students respond to a realistic mock crime scene and process it wearing the appropriate level of PPE. Their performance is evaluated and graded to ensure that they can operate in a hazardous environment once back at their duty stations.

Most commonly associated with the use of WMD, CBRNE also becomes a concern when conducting other types of crime scene investigations. An example would be an arson scene where the levels of poisonous gases, such as carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide, remain elevated long after the fire has been extinguished, leaving the level of oxygen dangerously low. Clandestine drug labs also pose extremely dangerous health hazards.

Some recent graduates of the course have said that it should be mandatory for all CID special agents. With more and more reports of suspicious activity and terrorist-related incidents occurring, this course is ideally suited for CID special agents. It would increase the capabilities of their investigative arsenal. Other students have commented that the training is extremely challenging and not just another "check-the-blocks" course.

For more information on the WMD/CBRNE Crime Scene Processing Course, see the Army Training Requirements and Resources System, visit the US Army Military Police Corps Web site at <*www.wood.army.mil/usamps/default.htm*>, or call Mr. William Anderson at 573-596-0131 ext 38136.